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Trump Administration Tightens Sanctions Against Cuba, Venezuela

New U.S. penalties target Caracas's trade in gold; Bolton calls two nations, along with Nicaragua, the 'troika of tyranny'



President Trump on Nov. 1 issued an executive order expanding on a series of sanctions the White House has leveled against Venezuela by barring U.S. individuals and companies from dealing with Venezuela's gold sector. PHOTO: SUSAN WALSH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Courtney McBride in Washington and Kejal Vyas in Caracas

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The Trump administration unveiled new sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela, part of an effort to target what White House national-security adviser John Bolton called a “troika of tyranny” that includes Nicaragua.

Mr. Bolton on Thursday praised Latin American leaders such as Brazil's newly elected conservative firebrand, Jair Bolsonaro, as “positive signs for the future of the region,” but said the three targeted countries are being singled out for political oppression and human-rights violations.

In a speech at Miami Dade College, Mr. Bolton said the State Department has added more than two dozen entities owned or controlled by the Cuban military and intelligence services to a sanctions list putting any financial dealings with them off limits to Americans or U.S. companies. Nearly 200 agencies, companies and hotels already are on the list.

Mr. Bolton cited the Cuban government's repression of its own people, as well as unsolved medical symptoms among U.S. diplomats and their relatives in Havana that are believed caused by external attacks of some form.

President Trump last year began to reverse predecessor Barack Obama's move to normalize relations with Cuba, tightening travel and financial transactions by Americans.

Mr. Trump issued an executive order on Thursday expanding on a series of sanctions the White House has leveled against Venezuela by barring U.S. individuals and companies from dealing with Venezuela's gold sector.

In recent weeks, a host of U.S. officials have called Venezuela's exports of the precious metal, mostly to Turkey, an effort by the isolated Maduro regime to loot the embattled nation's remaining wealth, while sidestepping existing U.S. sanctions.

The order leaves the door open for the departments of State and Treasury to target other Venezuelan industries that are considered corrupt as well as entities that provide them logistical and financial support.

The gold prohibition could deal a big blow to Venezuela's finances as the Maduro administration this year had turned to gold as an alternative to offset falling oil production, said Henkel Garcia, director of Caracas-based consultancy Econometrica. Turkish government data show some \$900 million in imports of Venezuelan gold in 2018, compared with none in 2017.

"This closes yet another window," Mr. Garcia said. "They can try to push more gold exports to the black market but that would be a very complicated situation and limit financing options."

The Nicaraguan regime, Mr. Bolton said, "will feel the full weight of America's robust sanctions regime" in response to its repression of its citizens, he said. The Trump administration in July imposed sanctions on Nicaraguan government officials for violence against political demonstrators that left hundreds dead.

Officials from the three countries didn't respond to requests for comment.

The United Nations' top human-rights official, Michelle Bachelet of Chile, called in a speech in September for international action to address "serious human-rights violations" in Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) said the Trump administration actions are the most strenuous in decades to target Latin American countries, and said Mr. Bolton's remarks in Miami "should make it clear to everyone that they aren't done yet."

Write to Courtney McBride at courtney.mcbride@wsj.com and Kejal Vyas at kejal.vyas@wsj.com